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ABSTRACT

This document consists of the three 1999 issues of a newsletter published to disseminate information and resources to child care providers and administrators in Canada. The Winter 1999 issue deals with safety for the adults working in child care centers, and discusses risk factors associated with noise, child sized seating, and changing tables. This issue also presents a working conditions checklist to assess early childhood classrooms. The May 1999 issue discusses outdoor play, nature activities, and designing outdoor play and education areas. The October 1999 issue focuses on children's rights, describing the rights of children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, how early childhood educators can ensure that children's rights are upheld, "The World around Us" curriculum used in some Canadian schools, family education on children's rights, and a university course on children's rights. Each issue of the newsletter includes resources for child care administrators related to the issue's focus, including training opportunities and materials available through the Child Care Connections library. (KB)



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E. Elaine Ferguson, Ed.

# Child Care Connections

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# Safety in the child care center is also for the early childhood staff

by: Philippe Markon, University of Québec at Chicoutimi,& Dominique Le Beau, Québec Compensation Board.

In a study analyzing 54 day-care centers[1], results indicated that the major causes of injury in early childhood practitioners were constraints imposed by the classroom lay-out, as well as posture and physical exertion in conducting early childhood programs. The early childhood centre must not only be a safe and healthy place for children but also for the early childhood practitioners who work there. Unfortunately, we still have early childhood practitioners who have muscular-skeletal problems, particularly in the lower back. Improving the working conditions will not only benefit the staff and the children, it will also have an impact on sick leave and the quality of life in the centre. This article will provide you with some food for thought about the working conditions at your centre and a short check list to use in assessing your own centre.

Examples of working conditions that are often present in early childhood centres and which have the potential to cause problems are noise, child sized furniture, and the diapering change table. The goal of the following activity is only to make you aware of your situation. If your assessment indicates a high level of risk, it is probable that your work environment is a source of physical and mental discomfort to you. Repeat this exercise for each classroom, and at different periods in the day and throughout the year.

## Noise

*Risk factors:*
Architectural problems such as noise reflecting material (windows, painted ceiling, polished floor), children crying or fighting, noisy toys or activities.

*Effects on the early childhood practitioner:*
Stress, aggressiveness, fatigue, lack of attention toward some children. The problem can be made worse by the cumulative effect of many different noises.

*Check out your situation:*
Which are the materials used in each room?
Are there particular activities or games that are a greater source of noise?
Could some toys be changed or used differently to avoid certain noises?

*Possible Solutions:*
Decrease reverberation by putting curtains on the windows.
Add acoustic tiles on the ceiling.
Have children play on the carpet with noisy toys.
Minimize the risk by selecting low noise toys.
Frequently plan a short period of relaxation during the day, preferably with soft music.

## Child Sized Seating

*Risk factors:*
The back is not supported and is bent or twisted without the appropriate sized seat. A child care practioner often sits with one or more childrenin her lap. While holding the children, the practitioner may be twisting while trying to help the children or to carry out demanding tasks such as dressing or feeding the children.

*Effects on the educator:*
Back pain, blood circulation to the legs and feet is slowed down.

*Check out your situation:*
Do you have an adult sized chair in each room?
Is the chair easy to lift, pull or push?
Is the chair lightweight and safe for the children? (a rocking chair may be hazardous for children)

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*Solutions:*
Have an adult- sized chair in each room.
Look for a product such as a floor seating chair which provides back support.
Make sure the practitioner's legs can slide comfortably under the children's table.

### The Diapering Table

*Risk factors:*
The table is not at the level of the adults height. The orientation of the table does not allow a good view of the group. One must lift the child up on the table, there is no helping device for the children to get on the table. The access to the various materials is inadequate (soap dispenser, sink, towel, garbage can).
*Effects on the educator:*
Stress caused by not being able to see the group of children. Stretching and twisting from reaching or from lifting may cause back pain.
*Check out your situation:*
What do you see while changing diapers?
Is it possible to do a diaper change all at once?
Can you keep in continuous contact with the child without having to stretch to reach for the material needed for the task?
Is it possible to carry out the task without being disturbed continuously by the other children?
*Solutions:*
The entire setting must be conceived in such a manner as to enable the educator to see her group while changing diapers. The child being diapered should be placed on a mat equipped with a thicker edge, preventing the child from rolling on his side. Everything should be handy for the task before it is begun. An air-tight garbage container can be placed under the sink. This has the advantage that the practitioner would not need to bend over to dispose of a diaper and it can be out of reach for the other children.

### A Working Conditions Checklist:

Use the checklist on page three to assess your classroom for negative working conditions that are affecting your health and safety. When you discover a problem, take steps with your co-workers to remedy the situation. The checklist will help to identify the risk factors in your workplace. Injuries result from extra effort, poor posture, repetition of movements or standing. ( see P.3)

**Aggravating factors recognized as being a direct cause of injury in early childhood care centers:**

*Lifting heavy loads using mainly the force of the back rather than the leg muscles:* lifting and handling children, serving meals...
*Adopting a poor posture:* mainly caused by the physical layout of the premise.
*Tasks are repeated very often and at short intervals:* Educators frequently change positions but the rest period is brief between each awkward position, as a result, there is very little benefit from changing position.
*Tasks that call for bending for a prolonged period of time:* Since they work in the world of the little ones, they often have to bend forward or lean forward for a long period of time.

**Aggravating factors which amplify the effect of the above:**

Stress: educators experience a high stress level, uncomfortable positions bring on muscular aches which will be further amplified if the surrounding conditions are stressful.
*Aging:* physical fitness decreases with age. This makes the body more prone to injury. The number of injuries to child care practitioners increases in relationship to the number of years spent working in an early childhood centre. However, statistical analysis of our study indicated that the most important risk factor is task performance and not age.
*Work organization:* sharing responsibilities among practitioners, getting the children's participation in various child care activities (setting the table, getting one's mat for the nap, picking up the toys in the main room and in the yard...)

*Lighting and noise:* a high noise level or inadequate lighting causes the practitioner, in certain situations, to modify her posture in order to see or hear better. This may aggravate the effects of a poor working position.

(continued P.4...)

**A Working Conditions Checklist**

| In the Classroom | Y/N | What can be done? Priority? |
|---|---|---|
| Tables and chairs are light and easy to move. | | |
| Tables and the bench attached to the wall are easy to pull up or down. | | |
| High chairs attached to the wall do not represent any physical constraint for the practitioners. | | |
| Mats and cots can be easily stored by practitioners. | | |
| Counters and sinks used to prepare snacks are at adult height. | | |
| A cart is available for the practitioner to carry food to the table. | | |
| In the nursery, sides of cribs are easily pulled up and down and do not make much noise. | | |
| Easy access to the playground. | | |
| The cloakroom has a counter at adult height to use when dressing the children. | | |
| Hooks in the cloakroom are at adult height for the infants and toddlers and at the level of the children who can dress themselves. | | |
| The cloakroom has individual boxes for children's mitts, caps and boots. | | |
| There is an outdoor shed which allows adequate storage and arrangement of toys and equipment. | | |
| **In the whole of the day-care center** | | |
| There is adequate area for an adult to move around. | | |
| The kitchen is easy to access for deliveries. | | |
| Dishes used are light and unbreakable. | | |
| Dishes are stored at adult height. | | |
| Heavy objects are placed at adult waist height for easy lifting. | | |

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(continued from P.2...)

**Do something !**

Many actions can be taken to improve working conditions in an early childhood centre:

- develop a physical layout that considers the workload of the staff;
- train leaders in health and safety at work for child care centers, specializing in the proper movements and posture to adopt in the centre;
- make sure that the initial training received by practitioners in college includes courses on health and safety at work;
- establish policies for early childhood services that consider the importance of prevention of physical stress and harm in the work place.

We can't wait for things to get worse in early childhood centres before doing something. Solutions exist ~ they need to and can be applied.

P. Markon and D. Le Beau "Health and Safety at Work for Day-Care Educators," research study, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, May 1994. Available through Child Care Connection's library or you may order a copy by contacting Dr. Markon at the address below. (English and French)

Philippe Markon Ph.D., University of Quebec at Chicoutimi, Chicoutimi, QC, G7H 2B1,
Dominique Le Beau M.E., ergonomist, Quebec Compensation Board, .730 est Charest, Quebec, QC, GIK 7S6

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## Let's Play Outdoors- Getting Back To Nature

by Steen B. Esbensen

...reprinted from a 1991 CONNECTIONS newsletter, as a tribute to its author Dr. Steen B. Esbensen. Steen was a professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Quebec and founded KOMPAN , Canada in 1983. Steen passed away on September 4, 1996.

Spring has arrived, so let's play outdoors. Children, teachers and parents of young children across Canada are eagerly awaiting the day when all the areas of the outdoor classroom are open to the children. But let us take a minute to think about how we are going to use the outdoor space.

First of all we assume that all early childhood education facilities have outdoor space available adjacent to their facilities. We also assume that all outdoor spaces at least provide the minimum space requirements of the provincial licensing regulations. However, this may not be enough to achieve the best possible play and learning experiences for young children. If there is insufficient play space outside, children may well be reluctant to go outdoors and the teacher may think of the outdoor space merely as a recess time experience. The willingness to go out to play depends on the teacher's perceptions of the importance to outdoor play experiences. The ultimate quality of the outdoor experience depends on the amount and quality of the space and time available to use the setting.

The challenge of early childhood educators and play advocates is twofold: to allocate a sufficient quality of time to outdoor play experience, and to ensure that a high-quality outdoor play environment is available. The outdoor play space should be designed so as to provide opportunities for children to develop an understanding and appreciation of nature as well as to develop physical dexterity, social, emotional and intellectual skills.

But let us concentrate on nature, the most abundant resource in Canada. *Nature* should be abundant in the outdoor classroom; sand, dirt, water, trees, bushes, flowers, vegetables as well as birds and insects. Who would disagree with this proposition? You may be surprised. A National Survey of Playground Equipment in Preschool Centres covering 349 preschool centres in 31 states in the United States provided some sad facts.[1] Could you imagine that 85 per cent of the centres in the survey did not provide an outdoor garden area in which children could plant and nurture their crops? Perhaps, even more appalling, was the fact that 88 per cent of the centres did not even include trees as part of the play setting.

Furthermore, it is discouraging that relatively few centres provided water and that only about 10 per cent of the 276 centres with designated sand play areas provided these as separate areas. An area for digging, a pile of either soil or sand, or a more generous garden area where children could dig and plant to their heart's content were even more scarce.

These findings are alarming and it leads us to conclude that nature is indeed at risk of disappearing from the daily life experiences of young children. The competing forces for land use and the development of revenue generating space in urban areas makes it exceedingly difficult to design playgrounds with an abundance of space to include all the areas necessary to offer a high quality outdoor classroom.

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But when early childhood education centres fail to provide even minimal contact with nature, how can we expect our children to develop a profound understanding and appreciation of our planet. Something must be done to alter the tendency to overlook the simple and least expensive play and learning resources when we say, let's play outdoors.

*Loose parts* such as wheeled toys and manipulative materials such as blocks, boards, dress up clothes, carpentry materials should be provided in the outdoor classroom to reflect good professional practice. We anticipate that these low cost items would be highly visible and present in play environments for young children.

The sections of the survey focusing on materials necessary to support the quality of play activities for young children provide results indicating great shortcomings in the field. Tables, easels, dress-up clothing and other loose materials were surprisingly all too frequently forgotten.

The variety of equipment and other materials listed in the survey is not impressive in terms of the absolute numbers or in terms of the percentage of equipment available. The materials and equipment identified as most supportive of enhancing manipulative/creative/social/dramatic play and interaction with nature were unfortunately rarely provided in this sample of preschool playgrounds in the United States. When these results are compared with the design recommendations identified in the early childhood education literature, it becomes very clear that there is room for much improvement in the field.

The striking thing about this data, is that the play areas which are the least costly to develop and which are most in tune with early childhood curriculum for environmental studies, are grossly underdeveloped in the majority of the 349 centres surveyed in the United States.

In Canada, we approach design or our early childhood education environments from a different perspective than our counterparts in the United States, so it is conceivable that professional practice across Canada is quite different. However, it is also possible that in many settings, we have forgotten to provide children with the natural experiences which they deserve.

As you get ready to go out to play, take a moment to observe your outdoor environment and see if there are things that you can do to embellish upon the setting by incorporating more natural materials and loose parts. Have fun and remember that the images of our childhood create the landscape for the future. In closing I would like to share with you a quote from Walt Whitman;

"There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day of a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years..."

*1. Wortham, S.C. & Joe L. Frost (1990) Playgrounds for Young Children: National Survey and Perspectives, Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.*

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## Play in the Natural World... How interaction with nature fosters our development.

by Kathy McKee-Flaherty

Remember the joy of standing in warn summer rain? Relishing the feel and smell of freshly cut grass or watching life in an anthill through a magnifying glass? Adults invoke these images as if they occurred yesterday. Many of life's lessons are learned through our playful interaction with the outdoor environment. As children play they master new skills, take on new challenges and achieve goals with greater confidence.

The benefits of outdoor play are:

**Interaction with nature:**

The complexity and unpredictability of nature can inspire protective feelings on the part of care giving adults, who do not want children to see the raw, or the real. Adults have been brought up in a generation where "taming" nature is seen as desirable. We should celebrate the diversity of experience found in nature and offer as much outdoor play as possible.

**Experiencing the effects of climate:**
The landscape of the playground is subject to frequent changes in temperature and weather conditions. Sometimes climate is a forceful entity that controls the environment and us. Weather changes are important nuances to play in the natural world, that should be accepted. Do not fight what you cannot change and learn to adapt.

**First hand experience of the laws of physics:**
What better way to learn that " what goes up, must come down" or "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction" than to push a swing or throw your lunch bag repeatedly over the side of a slide? Lessons such as the higher I am when I fall, the harder I hit the ground are best learned in childhood when the limbs are strong and the bones more malleable.

**Lessons on social order:**
Children on the playground quickly learn the social rules of their community, the hierarchies of their neighborhood and the results of their own initiatives. Anger management, negotiation, manipulation, co-operation and compromise are a few lessons of social citizenship learned.

**Increasing a child's arena of choice:**
Children at play can choose their own companions, are at liberty to select their own activities and are granted a broader range of movement than when indoors.

**Big voices and unrestrained body movements:**
Children's play choices are broadened while simultaneously being permitted to move boldly, stretch widely and yell loudly. By creating a rich and varied aesthetic outdoor environment we provide an essential spiritual link between humanity and nature. To do so successfully we must understand the play needs of children and find creative ways to support them outdoors.

**Do less and provide more:**
Outdoor areas are more fun when they are not highly maintained. Long grasses are more interesting than great expanses of lawn. Include plants of varied colours, textures and shapes; fragrant and flowing, species that attract birds or butterflies. Provide a water source either moving or still. Allow space for trees and shrubs that do not require drastic pruning. In their natural shape, shrubs make better hiding places and trees provide a focus for play. Define and enclose spaces with trees or mass plantings. These barriers establish a natural ambiance while providing shade and windbreaks.

**Don't be too tidy:**
Interesting play occurs when the unexpected happens. Although this can not be planned, it happens more frequently where there is a greater variety of land forms and natural features.
Consider not only living nature but also base elements - soil, sand, water and even fire as part of the play space. Make a resolution to offer children more access to animals.

The joy of being alive, the spirit of playfulness and the challenge to discover something new are easily fostered in the outdoor play space. Acceptance of the changes in the environment fosters openness to life where learning and development occur as a continual interchange between nature and the child.

"The sun is flaming in everything which grows, in children and trees and soft words. And in all which is in tune, is hidden the future growth of the child."
- Halfdan Rasmussen

*Kathy McKee-Flaherty, formerly a consultant with Kompan Playscapes Inc., is a landscape architect and the Executive Director of Landscape Nova Scotia.*

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## Learning and Teaching about Children's Rights

*by Ellen Murray, Ph.D. and Sandra Griffin, M.A., with early childhood care programs section by E. Elaine Ferguson, M. Ed.*

On November 20, 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, and with it, the global community took a significant step forward in the way it values and respects children and their rights. The Convention acknowledges the universal rights of all children. In recognition of the tenth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Canadians will be celebrating National Child Day on November 20, 1999. Together children and youth along with their caregivers, early childhood practitioners, teachers, child and youth care workers and families, can create and take part in child-centered activities which honour and respect children and youth while educating them about human rights.

### Early Childhood Care Programs

To celebrate National Child Day, early childhood practitioners can reflect upon children's rights and examine how those rights are incorporated into their early childhood care programs.

*What rights do young children (infants, toddlers and preschoolers) have under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child?*

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, young children have the same rights as any other person under the age of 18 in Canada. Summarized, they are:

- rights of provision such as adequate food, shelter, clean water, health care, and formal primary education;
- rights of protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation; and
- rights of participation such as children taking part in decision making about matters which directly affect them.

*What do you do as an early childhood practitioner to ensure that children's rights are upheld?*

Some things to think about and discuss:

...how do you speak out for children and families;

...how do you follow your early childhood practitioner's code of ethics and deal with ethical dilemmas individually and as a team; and

...how do you deal with infringements on children's rights?

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*What do you do as an early childhood practitioner to ensure that children know, practice and respect the rights of others and themselves?*

Some things to think about and discuss:

..how do the curriculum materials you have incorporated into your program address children's rights;

...how do your routines, schedules, materials, discipline measures and activities demonstrate, teach and practice respect for the rights of the children; and

...how do your interactions with children and adults demonstrate honour, respect and modesty?

By examining how one's early childhood programs demonstrate a respect for the rights of children and teach children about their rights and responsibilities, early childhood practitioners honour and respect children and their rights.

## School Programs

A recommendation of the 1994 report on the progress of implementing the Convention was that education programs on the Convention be further developed and implemented in Canada for persons of all ages. In light of that recommendation, and in response to ongoing interests voiced by teachers, students and families, several education programs have been implemented in Victoria, British Columbia. These programs offer insight to early childhood practitioners working with school aged children.

**The World Around Us** (Murray, 1995);

This curriculum has been successfully implemented within select public schools in Victoria, since April 1996 and recently into the eight Collaborative Learning Communities within the Calgary Board of Education in Alberta. The key purpose of this curriculum is to advance education for responsible citizenship by offering students opportunities to explore issues surrounding the human rights of children and their responsibilities. This comprehensive curriculum resource includes literature-based activities, with learning and teaching strategies that support children's conceptual development in addition to their literacy, social, and participatory skills. Classroom-based research on the impact of this curriculum indicates that Primary-level students can begin understanding and respecting their own and other's rights.

Both teachers and parents value how the curriculum enhances the children's social skills, such as respecting oneself and others as well as taking responsible actions. For example, in one Primary classroom where the curriculum was used, the students with their teacher examined an incident that happened the previous afternoon on the school bus. Jake had demanded that Mary give up the coveted window seat at the front of the bus just behind the bus driver. With the teacher's guidance, the children discussed the idea that even though Jake might want Mary's place on the bus, his freedom of choice was restricted in practice. Using a model for decision making included in this curriculum, the students and their teacher identified the problem, and considered options.

The children eventually decided that the seat should be available to all interested students. As the discussion continued, the teacher asked the students if the seat should be given to students with special needs, such as someone who walks on crutches. The children agreed that a person with special needs should get the seat; as eight-year-old Jake concluded: "Some people really need the front seat because it's too hard to get to the back of the bus, and not just because they want to look out the window." Perhaps when children can begin to reason the relationships amongst needs, rights, and responsible actions, then their awareness of rights and sense of respect and responsibility to oneself, others and the world may best be realized.

## Family Education Program on the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Developed in response to parent's interest, this program is meant to increase public awareness of CRC, and to strengthen ties between the school and the community by offering family-oriented education workshops. It includes a comprehensive Workshop Facilitator's Guide that assists in planning and presenting workshops that best meet the needs and interests of the target audiences. Its use as a model for community-based education about the CRC and children's rights, as well as child and youth advocacy and self-advocacy, is encouraged beyond Victoria.

## Giving Voice: Children's Rights Come Alive

This third-year university course, developed by affiliates of the School of Child and Youth Care in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund-Canada and the Canadian Coalition on the Rights of the Child is offered through distance education by the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria. A key purpose of this post-secondary course is to breathe life into the Convention by translating its principles into front-line child and youth care practice within various family, community, and cultural contexts.

In the spirit of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education, (1995-2004) the worth of education programs may be judged by the extent to which they afford citizens opportunities to learn about the Convention, and offer children and youth opportunities to understand and experience their rights and responsibilities. A legacy of learning and teaching about children's rights through such education programs may be that participants are moved to protect the rights of others by advocating for the inclusion, respect, responsibility, and safety of all persons at school, and within their communities.

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